

# Disability Awareness Begins With You



## Visual Impairments

The terms partially sighted, low vision, legally blind, and totally blind are used to describe individuals with visual impairments. They are defined as follows:

- "Partially sighted" indicates some type of visual problem has resulted in a need for assistance in accessing printed materials
- "Low vision" generally refers to a severe visual impairment, not necessarily limited to distance vision. Low vision applies to all individuals with sight who are unable to read the newspaper at a normal viewing distance, even with the aid of eyeglasses or contact lenses. They use a combination of vision and other senses to learn, although they may require adaptations in lighting or the size of print and sometimes Braille
- "Legally blind" indicates that a person has less than 20/200 vision in the better eye or a very limited field of vision (20 degrees at its widest point) after best correction
- Totally blind students learn via Braille or other non-visual media

Visual impairment is the consequence of a functional loss of vision, rather than the eye disorder itself. Eye disorders which can lead to visual impairments can include retinal degeneration, albinism, cataracts, glaucoma, muscular problems that result in visual disturbances, corneal disorders, diabetic retinopathy, congenital disorders, and infection.

### Incidence

The rate at which visual impairments occur in individuals under the age of 18 is 12.2 per 1,000. Severe visual impairments (legally or totally blind) occur at a rate of .06 per 1,000.

### Characteristics

A young child with visual impairments may not receive the same level of visual stimulation and may therefore be less likely to explore interesting objects in the environment and, thus, may miss opportunities to have experiences and to learn. This lack of exploration may continue until learning becomes motivating or until intervention begins. Because the child cannot see parents or peers, he or she may be unable to imitate social behavior or understand nonverbal

cues. Visual handicaps can create obstacles to a growing child's independence. Helping the child to receive accurate nonvisual information on social behaviors, typically through verbal feedback, is a way to overcome this barrier to learning.

### Educational Implications

Children with visual impairments should be assessed early to benefit from early intervention programs, when applicable. Technology in the form of computers and low-vision optical and video aids enable many partially sighted, low vision and blind children to participate in regular class activities. Large print materials, books on tape, and Braille books are available.

Students with visual impairments may need additional help with special equipment and modifications in the regular curriculum to emphasize listening skills, communication, orientation and mobility, vocation/career options, and daily living skills. Students with low vision or those who are legally blind may need help in using their residual vision more efficiently and in working with special aids and materials. Individuals who have visual impairments combined with other types of disabilities have a greater need for an interdisciplinary approach and may require greater emphasis on self care and daily living skills.

### Reading and Writing with Braille

Development of motor skills is critical because writing Braille requires fine motor skills. There are many ways to develop motor skills. Some ideas include weight-bearing activities such as pushing a wagon or other object and activities which develop finger strength, such as cutting various fabrics and types of paper with scissors, playing with play dough, squeezing sponges, playing with Legos or tinker toys, using tongs or clothespins, a whole punch or stapler, popping packing bubbles, and stirring. Many other activities of daily life will also develop hand and arm strength needed for operating a Perkins Brailier or using a slate and stylus. Development of tactual skills is also essential to a blind child's ability to read. The ability to recognize Braille symbols is dependent on the development of more basic tactual skills. Activities which develop tactual awareness include touching vibrating objects, playing in water and sand, and playing with clay and dough. Activities which develop the concepts of structure and shape include sorting objects by size, shape, and texture; nesting objects;

and putting parts together to form a whole. Use of blocks or other building toys can facilitate the development of part-to-whole relationships. Other activities which facilitate development of this concept include putting lids on pans, putting keys in locks, and putting screwdrivers into heads of screws. These three activities are also activities which are a part of everyday life and will be useful later.

### Guide Dogs

As tempting as it may be to pet a Guide Dog, remember that this dog is responsible for leading someone who cannot see. The dog should never be distracted from that duty. A person's safety may depend on their dog's alertness and concentration. The dog's primary responsibility is to its blind partner and it is important that the dog not become solicitous. A Guide Dog should never be offered food or other distracting treats. Please don't honk your horn or call out from your car to signal when it is safe to cross, which can be distracting and confusing. Be especially careful of pedestrians in crosswalks when turning right on red. The Americans with Disabilities Act permits guide dogs to accompany their handlers anywhere the general public is allowed, including taxis and buses, restaurants, theaters, stores, hotels, apartment and office buildings.

### Make Yourself Comfortable

If you are not sure whether the person refers to his/her disability as "blindness" or "visual impairment," you can ask, "What term do you use when you talk about your vision loss?" Blindness or visual impairment does not mean helplessness. It is best to ask the person if he/she needs assistance. Don't worry about phrases like "See you tomorrow," or "Look at this." People who are blind or visually impaired use these phrases too; they won't be offended. Let the person know who you are when you enter a room by saying something like "This is Joe, how are you?" When you leave the room you can say "It was good to talk with you. See you later." If the person who is blind doesn't hear you leave, he/she may begin talking only to discover you aren't there. Handshakes are best handled by saying "I'd like to shake your hand." Speak directly to the person and they will turn in your direction when replying as they use verbal cues when conversing with another person.

For more information contact:  
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1-800-552-7103